

In the Classroom 12

How Typography Impacts the Classroom Materials You Create

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Stan Skrabut: Thanks for taking time to listen to this podcast. As I always say, you could be doing something else, but you're hanging out with me and I really appreciate it. Next to lecturing, one of the most common activities we spend time doing as educators is sharing content with students. We share this content, could be text documents, it could be PowerPoint documents, but we are sharing content with our students.

How we prepare these documents will either add or detract from the learning experience. In this episode, we're going to look at one of the basic multimedia content forums and that's dealing with text. Specifically, we're going to explore how to better develop text documents to increase learning. Let's start with the basics of what typography is and why you should care. Typography is the art and technique or arranging type to make written language legible, readable and appealing when displayed. The arrangements of type involve selecting typefaces, point sizes, line lengths, line spacing, letter spacing and adjusting the space between pairs of letters.

The term typography is also applied to the style, arrangement, and appearance of the letters numbers and symbols created by the process. I pulled this from Wikipedia, but basically, typography focuses on how we visually represent text. Whether that's on a piece of paper, it's on a poster, a flyer or even our PowerPoint presentations. We have to remember that when we do this, this is for the benefit of our readers, not us.

We have to focus on what is best for our readers. Often this is not the case. We do a lot of things that are expedient for us, but it really doesn't help the learners at all. We need to kind of rethink that a little bit and this is very much in line with universal design for learning which I've talked about in previous episodes, which I'll link in the show notes so you can get back to them, but if students cannot perceive what we are presenting, they will certainly not understand it. They will not be able to comprehend it, so we have to make sure that we hit the first barrier that they can at least perceive it.

We need to present copy or our written words in a way that they can understand and gain meaning from what we display. As I said, this is in multiforms. Printed documents, it can be digital, it can be on a website, it can be on a mobile device, what we put in our LMS, all these different places we have an impact. For something that seems to be so simple, this idea of typography, it really has a huge impact on what we do in our day-to-day lives as educators and instructional technologies. You have to make sure that what you're putting together looks good regardless of what device that it's going to be seen on.

Also, does it look good when it is expanded? Because if you're dealing with students that need combinations, they may need to enhance or enlarge the text and doesn't look good. Those are definitely things that we need to think about. As I mentioned, we need to just put our learners first. If we do this right, everything is transparent to the reader, but you know when you get it wrong.

Have you ever looked at some text and thought. "What were they thinking? It's so bad. The typography is so bad." It's like, "I can't read this", and we do this all the time. I see it in PowerPoint presentations where suddenly it's all capital letters. That is extremely hard to read. It comes across as yelling if you do it in a text, but if you do it on a slide presentation it is just hard to read or if you do it in print, so you have to use normal sentence case in order to help comprehension and understanding. That's just one example.

Using the wrong font face or typeface when you do that, using a scripted language where it's very flowery, that can make something extremely hard to read. What is your purpose? Focus on that and make it very easy to read and understand. Here are some effective practices that you may want to consider when you are putting together text that you are going to give to students or somebody else that you're teaching or training that you want to-- Make sure that you're doing this.

First of all, keep it very simple. The focus should be on the message. Everything else should be transparent to getting that message across. If you do not get it right it becomes a distractor. That when you watch somebody giving a presentation and you see that they have a cowlick jumping up, it becomes a distractor. This is the same thing with text. That you want to make sure that they're focusing on the message, not wondering, "Who was this person that put this thing together? It's horrible." You don't want them to think about that.

Ways to do that, stick to one or two fonts. You may have one font for headings and another font for the body and then you can start manipulating that with styles. Like bolding or italics. You can start playing with that or playing with the sizes, but really you just want to keep down to a couple of fonts. That way you keep it as simple as possible.

Choosing the right font face for your message. That kind of like music, that you hear music for a scene in a movie and it sets the tone. Fonts also set the tone. That if you're putting together a very serious message, you probably don't want to use Comic Sans as an example, but you can also go the other way that the message is really light-hearted and you've got this big Gothic font, you don't want that changing the tone either. You have to make sure that the tone is appropriate for your message.

It also needs to stay consistent through your layout. You don't want to be changing fonts halfway through your document. You want to keep things pretty consistent throughout your whole document. You have to make sure that it's readable. If you are building a PowerPoint deck to support a presentation in a lecture, you need to get to the back of the room and see if you can read that from the back of the room. If you can't read it, you need to change your presentation.

Ways to kind of control for that, and these are not definitive. Like I said, you have to go to the back of the room and look at your presentation, and if you can't read it other people can't read it either, but on printed text, you really don't want to go any smaller than 12 points. I do understand for footnotes and things like that you may want to go smaller, but really for your text do not go any smaller than 12 points.

If you have a slide, you really don't want to go any smaller than 24 points, because that'll help this idea of readability even from the back of the room, but if you start getting farther away you're going to have to beef up the size of the text, but don't go any smaller than 24. If you're on the Web, you'll probably want to use something like 14 to 16 points to make it readable.

The other area that you can improve the readability of your text, deals with justification. Ideally, you want to have left justification from your body text where it's ragged, to increase the readability. Do not use full justification, that actually makes the document harder to read. The research has shown that left justification makes it easiest for reading and we should-- That's what people typically are used to seeing, so that's something that we should stick with.

Keeping your sentence length. If it happens to be a text document, avoid long line lengths. Keep it down to like 68 characters wide, that'll probably be the optimal size. I think it goes up to 75 or something like that, but you don't want it too short, you don't want it too long. Depending on what kind of work that you're doing. If you're doing printed work then you would want something with a Serif font, Times New Roman, for example, Garamond is another one. Basically, a Serif font has these additional pieces on the letter that stick out and for printed work it helps for readability. It helps to pull the eye along.

However, it can become very muddy if you are doing it digitally. They recommend using a Sans-serif font if you are going to put this up on the web or in a digital product like PowerPoint. You don't want those little additional feet, the additional lines at the end of the tips of the letters. That you want it without that. Be cautious of anything that is considered a novelty font or a scripting font. That you don't want to use those because they're just hard to read and you just definitely want to get the word out about your content and make sure that people can understand it. Really, all this is just trying to make it as readable as possible while setting the right tone.

Smart quotes. You have what are called straight quotes and you have smart quotes. When you are putting together documents, use the smart quotes. Once again it just helps with readability.

If you're creating Web-based learning materials other-- things that you want to consider, do not use underlines because underlines have recent been associated with hyperlinks. I can't count the number of times where I'm looking at something on the web and I see something underlined and I want to go click on it and I just come to find out, it's just plain text. Actually, it can be annoying. Once again, it's a distractor. If you're going to use underline, really reserve it for hyperlinks.

As I mentioned before, all caps doesn't help with learning, so just don't do that. Also the extra spaces at the end of sentences. At one time, it was appropriate to use two spaces after a period. Basically, the rules have changed. They have now indicated that it is more appropriate to use no space or just one space after a period. Knowing something about how the web works, you end up--

The web when you're using documents that have to auto form to different devices, this can cause problems when you're forcing additional characters in that don't need to be there, so try to avoid that. Also, if you're on the web, really try to avoid overuse of bold, italics, centered and colored text. Try to avoid those things and that will also help with readability.

The last section that I want to talk about is mobile devices. There's an article, it's *Typography In Mobile Design-15 Best Practices To Excellent UI*, or user interface by Trista Liu.

She shares some tips for selecting the right fonts for a mobile device. A lot of them there are really just in line with some of the things that I've already mentioned, but overly decorative fonts can make it really hard to read, so it's better to avoid those things.

Also, the thicker the font is, also makes it harder to read so keep the fonts thin as much as possible. The rules for mobile device as far as text goes that on iOS device, on Apple device, that you can go around 11 points, but for Androids that you want to go to 14 points for the main text. That way you don't have to make users manipulate the text.

Probably what's really important is that the site that you're building is adaptive for mobile devices. You don't want people to have to spread out the text in order to be able to read what you've put together. I see this quite often. I'm going to a site maybe on my phone and now it's like, "Ah, they didn't make it mobile-friendly." Now, I'm stretching things out and it's just really difficult to read.

Think about making mobile first and then everything else will just really kind of work quite well. For mobile, you don't want the line length any longer than 30 to 40 characters. Also break things up with spacing, kind of like bulleting, but you give some spaces between paragraphs. Keep paragraphs relatively short, it'll help speed through the reading and make it easier to read.

Actually, left-justify whenever possible. Titles or short lines, they can be centered, but really, for the most part that you're looking to just keep it left-justified. I know it seems like it's boring, that we're talking about typography, but when you see typography gone bad, you can understand why it's important. Our goal, as instructional technologists and educators are to help people learn and all these things, even though it's like, "Ah, there's just a bunch of rules." They're really important and if you set up your documents, you can set them up using templates and other mechanisms that will help control these things for you so you don't have to change them all the time.

That'll put you on the fast track to create the right type of documents for the students. Where it is not going to be a distractor. They can perceive what the message is and that'll just help for understanding and comprehension. That is what I have to share today on typography. We're going a little short today, but that'll give you a time to check out my book. Speaking of books, here's a quick plug for my book, *Read to Succeed*.